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ABSTRACT

This study examined the use of Conflict Managers, a program teaching students communication skills and the ways to apply these skills to resolve their own conflicts. Participating were 33 fourth and fifth graders from middle class families and with varying academic abilities. Of the participants, 23 were Caucasian, 4 Asian-American, 1 African-American, and 6 Hispanic-American. All students spoke English as a first language. Twelve students' parents were divorced. The Conflict Managers program was comprised of 4 weeks of training, in which students took a pre- and posttest, participated in group activities dealing with perspective-taking, nonverbal communication, the mediation process, "I-messages," and problem-solving practice. Teaching methods included role play, homework, and lunch meetings. Students were on duty as Conflict Managers in red vests or shirts, readily identifiable by classmates. The posttest findings indicated that following the training, students showed greater understanding of conflict as natural and potentially positive. Resolutions were obtained to 40 out of 46 conflicts; however, not all of the resolutions were positive. Findings suggest that additional training was needed to assist students in developing better resolutions. Although some students did receive additional training in listening skills, conflict styles, and problem identification, the impact of this training had not yet been determined. (Contains 17 references.) (KB)

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ED 422 100

CONFLICT MANAGEMENT

ACTION RESEARCH

BY: ANN KAMMERER

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INTRODUCTION

"Araki found that the highest occurrence of conflicts in the elementary school are harassment in the form of verbal threats, bullying, name calling and gossiping" (Cotton, 280). Students watch a woman on the news drive into a relative's house because she is angry with them. A sad but not surprising reaction to conflict in our society today. Another incident of inability to handle conflict responsibly was recently printed in the LA Times Newspaper. The article was about the Capistrano Unified School District. The article discussed a new policy the school board passed in response to parents' behavior. Anybody who has been teaching for any length of time has stories of parents verbally attacking him or her, swearing at him or her and even threatening them. Capistrano has decided enough is enough and parents who don't leave when asked will be escorted off of campus and charges will be filed against them. Students learn how to engage in conflict from their parents and other role models. It is no wonder then that students threaten and call each other names.

"Teachers intervene in students' conflicts, telling them how to solve the problem rather than helping them solve the problem themselves. Parents come to school to solve students' problems and go over the teacher's head to the principal to yell about the teacher. Nobody practices negotiation because we haven't been

taught to negotiate."(Scherer, 15). Disputes and confrontations are a daily occurrence and give students the perfect opportunity to learn how to participate in conflicts in positive appropriate ways opposed to accepting what they see.

Conflict Managers is a program that teaches students how to resolve their own conflicts. It teaches them communication skills and gives them the opportunity to apply their new knowledge in a safe environment. "Mediation training provides mediators with skills that will guide them through the mediation process and provide a set of lifelong skills. The core set of skills include active listening, empathy, decision making, and positive interpersonal skills" (Day-Vines, 400). This is especially important because "children who do not learn how to get along with others when they are young are likely to continue to have problems in their later life" (Cutrona, 96).

The research showed that Conflict Managers also save teachers and administrators time because they are not caught up in solving every little disturbance. Dudley, and Acikgoz (1994), found that before training, students most frequently used strategies included telling the teacher 51% of the time. Even if students did not bring the conflict to the teacher, they withdrew from the situation 15% of the time or repeated the request (Johnson, 473). Either

situation could eventually lead to unresolved issues that may eventually need the teacher's attention.

Conflict Managers empower students to take responsibility for themselves and their actions. However, mediators need to have on going training in order to help students with good resolutions. One concern found in the research was that the majority of resolutions consisted of students avoiding one another. "The Conflict Managers successfully mediated the conflicts 98% of the time with resolutions resulting 84% of the time in avoidance of disputants" (Cotton, 285). Training is necessary during the school year. Continuous training offers opportunities for continued skill development and personal growth. As students become proficient mediators training can build upon their skills. (Lupton-Smith, 382). "Benson and Benson (1993) described more advanced issues for continued training such as prejudice reduction, uncovering hidden interests, and advanced role playing" (Lupton-Smith, 382).

STATEMENT OF THE PROBLEM

In this study I will attempt to prove that Conflict Managers is a valuable program and some form of mediation should be used in all schools. If students are trained they will view conflict more positively and view it as an opportunity to problem-solve. However, on going training needs to take place for Conflict Managers to fulfill all the claims researchers have made about the effectiveness of the program. Conflict Managers does teach communication skills, and helps students resolve conflicts. If good resolutions are to be made and students are to gain life long communication skills then they need continuous training.

Questions To Be Answered

1. Does Conflict Managers teach students positive conflict and communication skills they can use?
2. What type of resolutions are disputants making?
3. Does additional training make a difference?

DESCRIPTION OF THE SAMPLE

The population of students in this study includes students in the fourth and fifth grade. There are 33 students participating in the initial training. Nineteen of the students are fourth graders and fourteen of the students are fifth graders. Students come from a middle class area. Twelve of the students come from families in which their parents are divorced. Six of the students are Hispanic and two of them speak more than one language. One student is African American. Four of the students are of Asian decent and all of them speak English as a first language. Twenty-three of the students are Caucasian. The students' academic abilities vary. Two of the students are in the GAIT program. One of the students is in the RSP program. One of the students is in the Greenhouse program, which offers additional support to students who don't qualify for RSP. Twenty-nine of the students are considered to have average ability.

RESEARCH DESIGN

This action research was done using lessons from the Conflict Managers' Program. It is a program that teaches students mediation skills so they can help other students solve conflicts on school grounds. It is also a program that should teach the conflict managers how to listen and communicate better, therefore, helping them engage in conflict in proactive positive ways.

Week 1

Students took the pretest, which consisted of writing as many words as they could think of that related to conflict. They also were given two situations and asked how they would respond to them. The training then began with an activity that required students to put themselves in another person's shoes. Literally, students interviewed another student and then told the class about their partner as if they were the other person. It is pointed out to students that often in conflict if you can just see the other person's point of view that many times the problem can be resolved.

The students also learned about active listening and learned the skills associated to it. This is especially important to the mediators because they are required to restate the disputants when they are mediating. The activity consisted of having a student go to the

front of the class and discuss the last movie they saw. The teacher demonstrates poor listening skills by looking away, slumping down in a chair, looking bored and laughing in inappropriate places. Afterwards, the teacher has the class clap for the volunteer. Then the teacher asks students if he/she appeared to be listening. Next, the teacher asked the students how they thought the volunteer felt as a result of the teacher's actions. The teacher then asked why the students felt that way. The teacher writes the students responses on the board. Next, another student discussed their favorite movie in front of the class this time the teacher listened attentively. The teacher kept eye contact, leaned forward, sat up, faced the student, nodded, and smiled when appropriate. Afterward, the teacher asked if she appeared to be listening. She asked for support of answers and wrote it on the board. Also the class discussed how this student felt as a result of the teachers action. And how the second volunteer felt compared to the first. The activity was followed up with questions about the importance of listening and what happens when you don't listen.

The second half of the first meeting was spent going over the mediation process and practicing it. The steps are as follows:

1. Conflict Managers introduce themselves to the disputants.
2. Conflict Managers ask students if they wish to solve their problem (they continue only if the disputants agree to this).

3. Conflict Managers remind the disputants that they are neutral and won't take sides.
4. Conflict Managers get the disputants to agree to the following rules:
    - Work to solve the problem
    - No name calling
    - No interrupting
    - Be as honest as you can
5. Then Conflict Managers ask disputants one at a time to state their side of the story.
6. After each disputant tells his/her story, the mediators restate what the disputant said, making sure not to change the wording.
7. Conflict Managers ask each disputant, one at a time, how they could solve their problem. Then they ask the other disputant if this is acceptable to them.
8. When a solution is reached, the Conflict Managers congratulate the disputants and fill out their form. They then move on to the next conflict (Conflict Management Program).

Students then break up into groups of four, two play the conflict managers and two play the disputants. Once students have finished the whole process they switch roles. The students are then asked to do two things for homework. One they must practice the conflict mediation steps and two find out from their teachers what days are good for them to be conflict managers.

Week 2

The second week of training consists of talking about non-verbal communication, "I" messages and then practicing the mediation process. Students are asked, what is non-verbal communication? Surprisingly students are usually way off. Then different forms of non-verbal communication are discussed, such as tone of voice, facial expressions, gestures, eye contact, and posture. Then the class shares both positive and negative ways of communicating in each. For example, eye contact is good to show you are listening, and eye contact is bad when you are rolling your eyes at your mother. After the discussion, students are given a card with an emotion on it and they act it out in front of the class without talking. The rest of the class must guess what emotion is being acted out.

Next, students learn and practice "I" messages. An "I" message is when students state how they feel. This is difficult for students because many of them don't really know what emotions are and instead try to state a behavior. So we stop here and discuss many different emotions, it helps that they just played a game in which they had to act out an emotion. Then students state the behavior of the other person: "I feel angry when you yell in my ear." After the behavior is stated the student then states the consequence to themselves from the other's actions: "I feel angry when you yell in my ear because it hurts me." Students then practice different ways they could use "I" messages at home with their siblings or

parents. Students are given a homework assignment to use "I" messages at home over the next week.

The last part of the day is spent with students practicing the mediation steps. Again they play both the mediator as well as the disputant. Usually the role-playing is done using conflicts that are typical to the playground. One example would be if two students are in a fight because one was voted out in handball but refused to leave the court.

Week 3

Students practice problem situations. What happens when disputants keep interrupting? What happens when disputants can't resolve the problem? What happens if disputants agree to a resolution that is not do-able? What are good resolutions? What happens if disputants start attacking the mediators? After practice students come together and discuss solutions to the various problems.

Students then review the conflict managers form and how to fill it out. They have a quick review and then take a test on the steps of the mediation process. Also on the test is some vocabulary such as disputant, resolution, and problem solving. After students take the test they were asked to again list words associated with conflict and how they would solve two different situations. The last part

of the meeting is spent congratulating students on becoming conflict managers and we celebrate with juice and cupcakes. The following day the schedule begins.

Week 4

Three weeks after students have been mediating; I held a meeting and asked for volunteers to receive additional training. It consisted of lunch meetings in which additional skills were taught. An additional lesson was taught on the importance of listening. Students were asked what kinds of problems they would face if they could not hear. We discussed times they had not been good listeners and problems they encountered as a result. Students then participated in an activity. Three volunteers were sent outside and the rest of the class was given a robbery report. The first volunteer came in and the teacher read the robbery report to her. Then the second volunteer came in and the first volunteer repeated what she could remember to the second volunteer. The third volunteer came in and the second told the third the story, and the third told the class the story. Meanwhile, the audience took notes. The third volunteer told of a story in which a fat tall man robbed a hardware store with a hole in his leg. Many details were left out and the report never said the man was fat but had a big stomach and the hole was in his jeans not his leg.

The second meeting was used to teach the students how to recognize the problem. Many times problems can't be solved

because the disputants perceive different problems. I read a conflict to the students and how the disputants view different problems. We talked about the problems associated with this. Then I read other conflicts to the students and they picked out the problems. This is important to do because many times the disputants won't agree on what happened when many times it doesn't matter what happened. What matters is how can you solve the problem.

The next few meetings were spent on going over conflict styles. Students were given a questionnaire to see what kind of conflict style they engaged in. Then the three different styles of conflict were introduced as passive, aggressive or problem solver. After that, groups of students acted out the various styles of conflict, while the others watched and determined the style of conflict that was being acted out. Then I gave them different forms to fill out when mediating that asked them to observe conflict styles in the disputants they mediated. I also gave them an assignment in which they were to observe three conflicts, what styles they were and how the conflict was resolved. The lunch meetings ended with a pizza party and the students feeling like they had learned how to be better communicators.

EVALUATION AND ASSESSMENT TECHNIQUES

I used a few different forms of evaluation. The first was a pretest in which students listed all words that defined or were associated with conflict. The second part of the pretest listed two conflicts and the students were asked how they would solve the problem. The second part I found invalid because students answered in the way they thought I wanted them too. The same test was given to the students as a posttest.

Another form of evaluation I used was the conflict manager form the students fill out after they have mediated a conflict. These forms were mainly used to assess what type of resolutions students were coming up with. A variation of this form was given to the group that did extra training. This form included questions to judge if students were using the additional skills they learned. For example, did you have to help the disputants identify the problem? Was disputant one/two a passive, aggressive or problem solver? Have you used any "I" messages this week either at home or as a conflict manager?

The last form of assessment was the test given to all conflict managers when they finished their training. They had to put all the mediation steps in order and they had to match vocabulary words to their meanings. All students passed with a hundred

percent. The evaluation process is an on going one. The second conflict mediation form with the extra information was just introduced to students. I will evaluate the information over the next few months to see if the extra training makes a difference. I will also meet with these students again to see how they are feeling about the program and if it is helping them in their own lives.

MATERIALS

To implement Conflict Managers, teachers should first be trained. In training, three different manuals are given to teachers. Student packets are then constructed from the manuals and consist of lessons on active listening, "I" messages, and the conflict mediation forms. Students will also need clipboards, pencils and the mediation forms on a daily basis. In addition, students need to have red vests or shirts to wear while on duty so they can be easily identified. Cards, butcher paper and worksheets are other items that will be needed for the various activities.

RESULTS

1. Did Conflict Managers teach students positive conflict and communication skills?

All students take a test on the mediation process before they become conflict managers. All students must pass the test. This in itself insures that some communication skills have been learned. In addition to the test I gave students a pretest.

Anytime a word is listed, it is a word a child related to conflict. If an asterisk (*) is present, that means an additional child listed that word on their list. The pound sign (#) represents a word that has been determined to relate to conflict in a positive light.

On the pretest students listed the following words that they related to conflict:

Pretest	Posttest
Argument****	*******#
Talk it over	********** #
Ignore	*
Be nice	* #
Say sorry	****** #
Walk away	********* #
Mad **********	**********
Fight **********	*********
Accident	
Help	****** #
Friend	*** #
Physical**	
Suspension *	

Complain *
Problem *
Madness
Mean *********
Solving
Not being nice
Not being responsible *
Not respectful *
Behavior *
Sadness *
Solving problems
Surprised
Hurt******
Angry *******
Name calling****
Shoving**
Pushing ******
Bad notes
Getting in trouble*
Insults**
Words
Pout
Yelling******
Bad***
Unhappy*****
Weak
Crying****
Upset*
Something wrong
Bad language**
Bad attitude
Hitting**
Rowdy
Rough
Pinching*
Nasty*

Good Advice **#

********* #
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Helpful **** #
Nice ****** #
Patient #
Caring**** #
Respectful*** #

Explaining* #
Responsible***** #
Mature #
Feelings******** #
Disputants*********#
Resolution*****#

On the pretest, ten words were listed that had a positive connotation, with 13 students listing one or more of the words. In other words usually only one child put the positive response. On the posttest, there were 22 words that had a positive connotation, with the words being listed 122 times.

I believe that yes students did learn communication skills. For one, the training taught very specific communication skills, such as: active listening and restating using "I" messages and helping students solve problems. I also feel they learned better communication skills, because on the posttest students listed positive word 109 times more often. This shows me that students are understanding that conflict is a natural part of life and they have more skills, and a better understanding of how to come to good resolutions. If students understand that conflict is natural, and they actively listen to others, if they believe it is about feelings and caring and being mature, then I believe they have developed better communication skills. At the same time, I believe more testing and evaluations should take place. This is just a start, but I think it is a good one. A child throws a temper tantrum because they don't know how to communicate their frustration in a more acceptable way. If students have the vocabulary to express themselves and they are taught how to engage in conflict then we have given them the tools to communicate in appropriate ways.

2. What type of resolutions are students making?

I collected the conflict manager report forms that students fill out when they help others solve a conflict. Listed below are resolutions from these forms.

Hide or run away
Go tell a teacher ***
Not push
Talk it over
Walk away ********
Ignore it ****
Not try to spy on him
Not call names ***
Not kick *
Be careful **
Play nice
Not play rough *
Not get so close
Stop saying bad words and making fun **
Walk around the court next time *
I don't know
Won't kick the ball when I'm out
Said I'm sorry ****
Six students did not come up with a resolution

There were 23 report forms involving 46 disputants. Six disputants did not come up with a resolution leaving 40 resolutions. Conflict managers claims to save teachers time and these reports show that teachers' time was saved. The conflicts involved name calling, breaking game rules, and some physical contact. In this conflict manager program it appears that sometimes students just want someone to listen to them and they are just as happy with a conflict manager as they are with a teacher. Students are willing to have help from the conflict managers and that is valuable and does save teachers time.

However, the resolutions do not show that the disputants are coming up with good resolutions. The conflict managers may have learned communication skills but I question if those skills are being reinforced by their participation in conflict managers. If the conflict managers are viewing resolutions such as don't push next time, don't call each other names and go tell a teacher then the conflict manager needs additional skills to help the disputants come up with better resolutions.

On the average, there are four sets of two conflict managers out for recess and lunch recess. Students typically fill out three forms a day so that twelve sets of disputants are being helped between the two play periods. Does this save teachers time? Yes. Are the disputants learning any communication skills? Yes, because they must listen to the other student without interrupting and they have to come up with a resolution whether it is a good one or not. Most resolutions are not good ones though. I think Conflict Managers need to be more than a device to save teachers time. I believe that conflict managers and disputants would get far more out of the program if they were taught better skills for making resolutions.

3. Does additional training make a difference?

Students need additional training. Looking at the resolutions being made it is clear that students' skills need to be improved if the

program is to benefit them for life. Not only that, but the better the resolutions the more likely that problems won't continue, problems that may eventually need teachers' attention. In addition, students need to have the initial training and then experiment having the opportunity to later brainstorm problems they have come across.

It is too early in my research to be able to show a difference between students who received additional training and those who did not. The students received additional training in listening skills, conflict styles and how to identify the problem. They are filling out different report forms that ask them to pay particular attention to those areas. For example, what conflict style did the disputants have: passive, aggressive, or problem solving? Did you have to keep the disputants focused on the problem? In making the conflict managers aware of these things I am hoping that they will be more aware of what conflict is all about. In becoming more aware of the conflicts they help resolve, I believe they will analyze their own conflicts and focus on what they need to do to be problem solvers.

I gave the students who participated a questionnaire to see what kind of conflict style they used. Out of the eleven students, four of them used aggressiveness most often, and five of them used passiveness most often, that left two that used problem solving.

After I taught the lesson on the three styles of conflict, the students understood that problem solving was the best. I explained that I already knew this but many times I have to force myself to use it because I tend to be passive. I hope in teaching them about conflict that they will strive to better communicate and develop a problem solving conflict style. Only time will tell. Until I get many of the conflict forms back I won't know if they truly understood or if they are focusing on the items I asked them to.

CONCLUSIONS

In Conflict Managers, students learn how to listen actively, use "I" messages and how to solve problems themselves. Students learn how to communicate their feelings, exchange information and their concerns in a conflict. Students' attitudes toward conflict become more positive and they are more likely to feel that conflict is a normal part of life. Furthermore, it gives them a safe learning environment to practice their skills.

When students are trained in Conflict Managers, they learn a mediation process that helps them solve conflicts because it is broken down into steps. The program gives students responsibility and therefore takes pressure off of teachers. It teaches students life skills that many adults do not possess. If we want our schools to be positive peaceful places we can no longer depend on parents. Schools need to teach students the skills to ensure that they are all exposed to them.

This action research has been a learning experience for me. I not only taught the lessons to the students but I learned about myself in the process. I was shocked to find what type of resolutions students were making and I realized that it is a learning process and not something to be done overnight. It also showed me that follow up lessons are crucial to the success of the program. We do

live in a society that is violent; the news, TV, and even our neighborhoods are full of violence and the inability to effectively communicate. Sometimes becoming better at something is just a matter of knowing some strategies. How many parents sit their children down and say, "this is how you should negotiate when you are upset with someone." That is what Conflict Managers does, it teaches children how to work through their problems giving them the skills necessary to prevent destructive conflicts. It teaches them listening skills, how to communicate feelings and how to problem solve, providing students with lifelong communication skills (Day-Vines, 400). It is an invaluable program from which every school could benefit.

My questions have been answered. I believe conflict managers does help students build their communication skills. I found that students need more help in making good resolutions. I also believe that further training needs to provided.

RECOMMENDATIONS

"When children don't know how to handle conflict, they fight. It may become increasingly difficult for children to arrive at cooperative agreements because their conflicts fester or escalate as a result of not knowing how to handle them" (Scherer, 14). If schools are to be peaceful places then students must be empowered and taught how to engage constructively in conflict.

At-risk students need preventive strategies. Teaching students mediation skills offers a preventive program (Smith, 72). It is a program that will teach students valuable skills. Such as listening, communicating feelings and problem solving. It gives students a plan to follow in order to reach resolutions. I would recommend this program to every school.

I also would recommend that when implementing a program, much emphasis be placed on continued training. My research showed that while students learn skills, they are useless if students do not use them and review them. In addition, students need to have practice with the skills they learn and then be able to brainstorm about what went right and what went wrong. If students are trained and then left on their own they may not be learning communication skills at all. The students and the program should be closely monitored.

I recommend that in providing additional training students are able to evaluate themselves and others. I believe students should understand how they engage in conflict and should observe others. In doing this, students may see conflicts that are handled well and conflicts that are handled poorly. Then students will have experience and knowledge in how to better handle their own conflicts. In being aware of their own conflict styles students will know where they need to improve and how they need to go about doing that.

Children learn how to engage in conflict from the adults and media around them. If they do not have good role models then they will not have good skills. Conflict Managers offer a preventive program in which students learn how to communicate and handle conflicts. The program saves teachers and administrators time by empowering students to handle their own conflicts. My research proved to me that it does teach valuable skills, but the training needs to be an on going process. Conflict Managers takes time and money, but it is well worth it when it improves school safety.

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INFORMATION ADDED TO CONFLICT MANAGEMENT FORM

CONFLICT SYLE

1. Disputant one was	Disputant two was
Passive	Passive
Aggressive	Aggressive
A problem solver	A problem solver

INFORMATION ON USE OF SKILLS LEARNED

I used an "I" message	TRUE	FALSE
I restated the disputant	TRUE	FALSE
I listened carefully	TRUE	FALSE
I had to make the disputants		
Focus on the problem	TRUE	FALSE
I have recently used		
Conflict manager skills at home	TRUE	FALSE

Pretest and Posttest

Name _____

List as many words that you can think of that have to with conflict.

If you were playing hand ball and someone bumped into you and then called you a name what would you do?

What if the person who bumped into you was a good friend? Would you react differently?